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SUBJECT: STREET VENDORS RIOT OVER CITY COUNCIL CLEANUP

¶1. SUMMARY: Street vendors on the old Maseru Bus stop staged a demonstration against the City Council on July 13, to protest against the removal of their tables and food from the area overnight. The group forced shop owners, who are mostly Chinese to close down their shops, and hurled barricades across roads to prevent traffic from moving. According to officials of the Maseru City Council, vendors are not allowed to leave their property on the sites they have been allocated to sell their food/wares from, lest they be treated as garbage and removed by workers of the council. The situation was quelled by police who negotiated with leaders of the group instead of using force, and asked them to go to the offices of the City Council to negotiate the return of their property. END SUMMARY.

¶2. A front page story entitled "Street Vendors up in Arms" in the MOPHEME newspaper dated July 19, describes the action taken by the vendors as reminiscent of the 1998 political riots, as they used sticks and stones, and kicked rubbish bins, bringing a stand-still to commercial activity at the old bus stop and Cathedral Area of Maseru. Note: The area where the riot took place is scanned by the Roman Catholic cathedral and the Lesotho Evangelical church in an area where businesses are predominantly owned by Basotho, Indians and Chinese. Hundreds of street vendors frequent this area because they can sell their wares to travelers who board buses and taxis destined for all corners of Lesotho. A number of primary and high schools are also found in the general area, and students will often abscond from going to school in favor of drinking liquor sold by the vendors. End note.

¶3. Speaking in a phone-in program on the national Radio Lesotho on Monday July 24, officials of the Maseru City Council were emphatic that the permits issued to street vendors specify that all tents, boxes, pots and tables are supposed to be removed from the street at the end of every day. Any property left is considered as garbage, and removed for purposes of cleanliness.

¶4. The officers further stated that it had come to their knowledge that street vending is done by people who are hired by some civil servants and foreigners to sell their wares on their behalf. They said such people were doing this to avoid applying for licenses that permitted them to conduct their businesses from known premises where they would, among other things, pay value added tax on their sales. They gave the example of one trade who unloads bags of oranges by truck, and warned him to desist from the action lest legal action be taken against him.

¶5. Representatives of organized street vendors complained about the City Council Market Master and his staff, who issue permits to people who should not be selling at the level of street vending. They said it is these people who do not belong to their group who refuse to take part in cleaning campaigns around the vending zones. They also sighted some shop owners who don't own garbage cans, but throw their garbage onto the streets.

¶6. Callers to the program generally agreed that the city

council is not doing enough to enforce rules of cleanliness and zoning of street vendors. They complained about vendors who pitch tents and sell food on street pavements, making the movement of pedestrians difficult. Callers from other towns in the country complained about similar uncleanliness in their towns, and called on local authorities to enforce the laws.

17. COMMENT: The Maseru City Council has been lax in enforcing laws governing street vending. As a result every bus stop in the city has become a squatters' camp where permanent plastic dwellings have become hovels for illegal liquor sale, muggings and prostitution. Sporadic raids like the one carried out last week lead to riots because the vendors claim legitimacy in protecting semi-permanent structures which they have constructed and continued to use in full view of the council. The street vendors' most recent incident reflects the underlying socio/economic ills plaguing Lesotho as it seeks appropriate economic reforms. Addressing the needs of the poor remains a challenge in this developing country. END COMMENT.

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